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The quest for quality literacy agendas in early childhood education

Leonie Rowan and Eileen Honan

While there is widespread agreement among educators, parents and members of the community that early childhood education plays a vital role in the consolidation of children's literacy skills, there is increasingly *less* agreement about what it is that the word 'literacy' actually means. Recent years have seen the emergence of a veritable 'literacy industry' within which the term has come to be associated not only with the traditional activities of reading and writing, but also with newer skills associated with contemporary life. Emphasis has increasingly been placed upon the importance of such things as media literacy, computer literacy, technological literacy, visual literacy, or emotional literacy, for example. This creates a challenging environment for early childhood educators who are expected to possess an increasingly wide range of operational, cultural and critical literacies, as well as skills in being able to map and monitor the progress of all their students in these areas.

While it is not difficult to understand the rationale behind the introduction of programmes designed to address ever-increasing forms of literacy, the plethora of literacies (coupled with increasingly public monitoring of literacy 'achievement' and regular declarations of literacy crises) create an environment that can be overwhelming, stressful, and ultimately unproductive for teachers and children. In this space it is easy for all educators to become both literally and literarily lost.

In response to these contexts, this chapter has the following aims. First, to provide a brief map of the current debates on literacy that impact on the fields of early childhood education and to identify some of the assumptions underpinning various literacy agendas; second, to explore an example of an early years programme currently operating in Australia, and to reflect upon the assumptions about contemporary literacy that underpin, and are constructed by, the implementation of this programme and finally, to identify some key ideas that may be useful in helping early childhood educators move positively through complex terrains in the pursuit of meaningful, defensible and achievable literacy goals.

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ways in which literacy practices in various contexts reflect wider social patterns, and influence the operation of power, and norms of various cultures.

These three dimensions of literacy are often brought together within the framework known broadly as 'critical literacy' which has been conceptualized by Luke as:

> a rudimentary working definition of critical literacy entails three aspects. First, it involves a meta-knowledge of diverse meaning systems and the sociocultural contexts in which they are produced and embedded in everyday life. By meta-knowledge I mean having an understanding of how knowledge, ideas and information bits are structured in different media and genres, and how these structures affect people's readings and uses of that information. Second, it involves mastery of the technical and analytical skills with which to negotiate those systems in diverse contexts. This refers to how the pragmatics of use of literacy are translated into practice in different contexts. Third, it involves the capacity to understand how these systems and skills operate in relations and interests of power within and across social institutions. This means an understanding of how and why various social groups have different and unequal access to literacy (and knowledge), and how access and distribution work in the interests of some groups and can disadvantage others.
>
> (2000, p. 72)

It is, of course, possible for critical literacy education to focus on purely traditional texts. In recent years, however, many scholars have moved to emphasize the importance of both new literacies *and* new texts, by promoting the concept of new literacy studies: a framework that attends to most of the same questions as critical literacy, but which explicitly foregrounds 'new' literacy practices, and new (kinds of) texts.

A similar or related intent is captured by other authors who have focused on advancing the concept of 'Multiliteracies' as a new context for educators:

> The notion of Multiliteracies supplements traditional literacy pedagogy by addressing these two related aspects of textual multiplicity. What we might term 'mere literacy' remains centred on language only, and usually on a singular national form of language at that, being conceived as a stable system based on rules such as mastering sound–letter correspondence. This is based on the assumption that we can actually discern and describe correct usage. Such a view of language must characteristically translate into a more or less authoritarian kind of pedagogy. A pedagogy of Multiliteracies, by contrast, focuses on modes of representation much broader than

> language alone. These differ according to culture and context, and have specific cognitive, cultural, and social effects. In some cultural contexts – in an aboriginal community or in a multimedia environment, for instance – the visual mode of representation may be much more powerful and closely related to language than mere literacy would ever be able to allow. Multiliteracies also create a different kind of pedagogy: one in which language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes.
>
> (Cope and Luke, 2000, p. 3)

When an awareness of multiple texts is combined with an appreciation of the value of multiple levels of literacies, the end result is often a literacy agenda that challenges educators to broaden their understanding of what 'counts' as literacy, and to use an increasingly wide array of texts to engage their students in new forms.

It is important to acknowledge here, that this kind of work draws attention not only to textual practices, but also to cultural practices that are fundamentally interwoven with, and associated with, textual production and analysis. Specifically, it is important to acknowledge the fact that debates about Multiliteracies are emerging alongside debates about the best ways to educate 'productive citizens' and 'knowledge workers' in an era of uncertainty and change. In Australia, this debate is seen in the attempts by most state educational authorities to 'redefine' the kinds of knowledge that should be regarded as the 'core business' of education. In Queensland this has led to the emergence of a 'new basics' programme, which emphasizes the importance of Life pathways and social futures; multiliteracies and communications media; active citizenship and environments and technologies (see Yelland, Chapter 14, this volume). In Victoria, South Australia, and Tasmania, attention has been focused on the identification of 'essential learnings'.

In South Australia the essential learnings are defined as 'futures, identity, interdependence, thinking and communication'. In Tasmania, the designated essential learnings are 'thinking; communicating; personal futures; social responsibility; world futures'. In the Northern Territory, the term employed is EsseNTial Learnings, and the emphasis is on four knowledge domains 'the inner learner (Who am I and where am I going?), the creative learner (What is possible?), the collaborative learner (How do I connect with and relate to others?) and the constructive learner (How can I make a useful difference?)' (Australian Education Union, 2004). And soon another state, Victoria, will implement its own set of essential learnings.

Three points are particularly important to note. First, the general tenor of the 'Essential Learnings' frameworks indicates a move to prioritize the kinds

of 'new' and emerging literacies that have been highlighted within literacy literature, particularly by those who are aligned with either the Multiliteracies framework, or the New Literacy Studies, over the past decade.

Second, these formalized quests to redefine and map what 'counts' as valued, valid, applicable, relevant, and responsible knowledge clearly impacts upon the world of literacy education, as teachers across all year levels are challenged to demonstrate the ways in which their literacy practices prepare kids in both technical and ideological ways for the world that is unfolding. Thus pressure is consistently placed on teachers to demonstrate that their students can perform basic tasks of encoding and decoding (i.e. 'old literacies'), *and* to illustrate the ways in which their literacy work helps to produce the kind of informed, reflective, tolerant citizens (with the 'new literacies') demanded in the age of diversity.

Third, the whole educational reform agenda (as illustrated here by the examples from the Australian context) is further complicated by the kinds of social and cultural anxiety that characterizes a world where terrorism is both a daily topic and a regular reality. At the time when educational policy places emphasis upon the celebration of new literacies, (and the development of skills that best prepare individuals to live in culturally diverse and rapidly changing societies), a whole range of cultural discourses are working to reinscribe divisions between the 'us' and the 'them' of terrorism.

Rowan has asserted that:

> at precisely the same historical period when concepts of difference, heterogeneity and multiplicity are prominent in critical discourse, mainstream media, political and popular culture texts are just as likely to insist upon the desirability of sameness, homogeneity and consistency.
>
> (2003, p. 6)

In this context, as Appadurai notes: 'minorities are the major site for displacing the anxieties of many states about their own minority or marginality (real or imagined) in a world of a few mega states, of unruly economic flows and compromised sovereignties' (2001, p. 6). In the year 2004, then, the average literacy educator is faced with at least four contextual debates; first, there is the academic literacy literature which emphasizes the importance of things such as Multiliteracies and critical thinking; second, the popular media promotes a literacy which insists on the value of the basic skills in reading and writing; third, there is educational policy which prioritizes, among other things, the kinds of multiple literacies that are considered to be the most likely to prepare the kind of 'good citizens' who can successfully negotiate complex, unstable and culturally diverse worlds but paradoxically wants or needs to take note of measures of basic skills; and finally there is a widespread set of anxieties about

the ways in which cultural diversity should be most responsibly managed in a world where attention to difference seems less palatable to many community members, than an insistence of sameness.

The point we are trying to make here is that this average literacy educator is positioned in extremely complex terrain, trying to negotiate productive ways forward that will satisfy the diverse demands of all those involved in these debates including, of course, the heterogeneous community of parents, caregivers and students themselves.

If one accepts a literacy agenda that is focused on developing operational literacies and cultural literacies and critical literacies; and if one further accepts that these literacies relate to broad categories of text types, i.e. to print and spatial texts; to 'school' and not-school texts, then one could conceivably undertake a mapping of the terrain that might reveal where literacy activity was focused and productive. One could place text types, for instance, on an axis of a grid, and 'literacy' type on another, and then identify the extent to which any particular environment includes multiple text forms (visual, print; canon, popular culture, kid-centred, adult-centred, and so on) and various performances of literacy (reading, writing, analysing, making, critiquing texts, and so on). If the mapping was three-dimensional, it would be possible to add another aspect to the chart in order to reflect the ways these various literacies are assessed. The important point that emerges through the combination of these grids (which, we hasten to emphasize would be illustrative devices only, and not intended to be used as the sole criteria for analysing *any* literacy space) is that literacy programmes can be assessed in relation to the assumptions that they make about:

- literacy (and its most 'valuable' dimensions);
- texts (and the most 'significant' or important text 'types');
- learners (and their 'typical' or 'normal' behaviours);
- assessment (and its relationship to valuable literacy, significant texts and normal learners);
- the 'world' (and its contemporary challenges);
- education (and its fundamental purposes).

And, most importantly, by the inclusions and exclusions that they reproduce. For in a world where 'literacy' is an ever evolving term, this multiplicity is not automatically reflected in 'schooled' approaches to literacy education.

In the next section of this chapter we want to explore some of the ways in complex and competing discourses around literacy are reflected within one particular Early Years Literacy programme as it has been introduced in the state of Victoria in Australia. We will contrast this institutionalized response with a brief exploration of the different kinds of literacies likely to be found within the classrooms, and the homes occupied by some contemporary kids.

Contemporary literacy within 'old' classrooms and 'new' households: the possibilities and practices of different literacy environments

> Water water everywhere and still the boards did shrink
> Water water everywhere and not a drop to drink.
> (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*)

We turn now to an analysis of the Early Years Literacy Program in Victoria, Australia. Our primary goal is to identify the way this particular programme conceptualizes literacy and learners. It is necessary to begin with a description of what the programme involves and the resources that support it. It is hoped that this process will facilitate readers to critique their own contexts by illustrating the ways in which the techniques can uncover the uneasy tensions between policy and practice in contemporary educational settings.

Key features of the programme

The Early Years Literacy Program (EYLP) requires a whole-school approach to literacy teaching with the following features:

- a daily two-hour block of uninterrupted time for teaching literacy (called the literacy hour);
- a focus on 'data-driven instruction' (Hill and Crevola, 1999, p. 8) with regular and ongoing assessment and monitoring of students' progress throughout the year;
- the provision of support to the programme usually provided through the funding of Reading Recovery intervention programmes;
- funding for the appointment of a part-time Early Years Literacy Coordinator;
- professional development for teachers in the programme;
- 'strategically planned home/school liaison' (Alderson, 2000, p. 335).

These organizational features would be recognizable to teachers in the UK who are familiar with the National Literacy Strategy and the Literacy Hour (http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy/).

There are three kits that are distributed to teachers implementing the EYLP: the Early Years Reading Resource Kit; the Early Years Writing Resource Kit; and the Early Years Speaking and Listening Resource Kit. Each kit contains resource books and videos. The books are Professional Development, a Teaching Guide (for example, Teaching Readers in the Early Years), and in the

reading kit a book for parent helpers. There is also a substantial website with many of the materials available electronically (http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/eys/lit/index.htm).

Each Teaching Guide contains a diagram of the organizational framework (represented in Figure 13.1). Each Guide and Professional Development manual outlines the specific teaching strategies recommended for use in EYLP, and the Guides for Teaching reading and writing also include outcomes and indicators for each level of the 'six developmental stages' of reading or writing. The

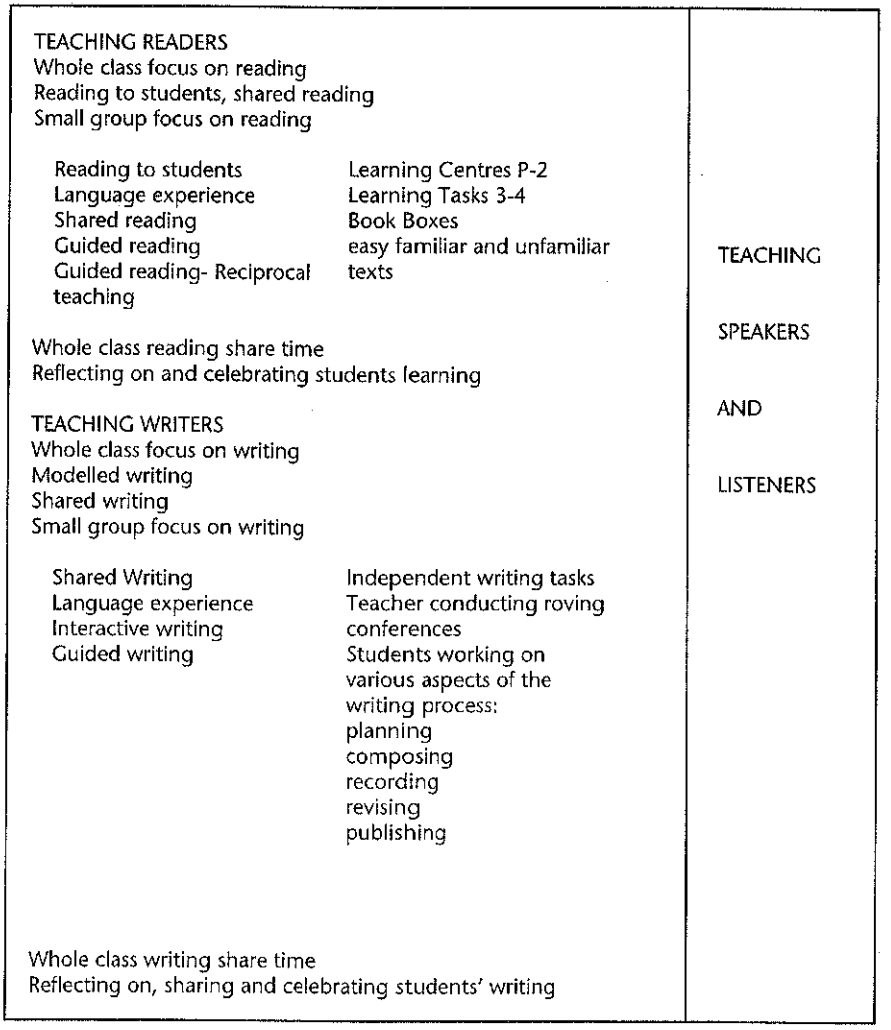

Figure 13.1 The structured classroom programme.

videos contained in each kit provide illustrative examples of each of the teaching strategies being used in classrooms.

The production of literacy within the EYLP

To come to some kind of understanding of the particular types of literacies that are conceptualized within the EYLP, we have analysed the texts described above to determine their discursive production of literacy. This of course is only one part of a discursive analytic framework – what is missing in this analysis is how teachers themselves take up positions within such discursive productions – how they make sense of the versions of literacy that are represented as normative in these texts. We are wary of falling into the trap so aptly described by Ball, of producing a policy textual analysis that ignores the 'secondary adjustments' (Ball, 1994) that teachers make as they work within and around the policies. In previous work, Honan has investigated this teachers' work through a rhizo-textual analysis of the 'provisional linkages' (Honan, 2001, 2004) that connect teachers' discursive practices and those discourses operating in policy texts. Making these connections is especially useful in discounting the privileging of the 'policymaker's reality' (Ball, 1994, p. 19) that is assumed in many descriptions of the relationship between teachers and policies. In what follows we use this rhizo-textual analytic method to explore how the discourses operating in the EYLP texts work together to produce a particular version of literacy teaching and learning.

Understanding both texts themselves, and the readings of these texts, as rhizomatic disrupts common assumptions about the relations between teachers and policy texts. In the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari refer to their text as a rhizome and point out that:

> Any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other, and must be . . . A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, social sciences, and social struggles.
>
> (1987, p. 7)

This ceaselessness of the connections between rhizomes shifts attention away from the construction of a particular reading of any text towards a new careful attendance to the multiplicity of linkages that can be mapped between any text and other texts, other readings, other assemblages of meaning. A rhizo-textual analysis of the relation between texts and readers reveals a variety of 'scrupulous and plausible misreadings' (Spivak, 1996, p. 45). There is no one correct path to take through a rhizome, no one true way of reading rhizomatic texts. Grosz describes this understanding of texts as rhizomatic: 'A text is not a repository of knowledges or truths, the site for storage of

information . . . so much as a process of scattering thoughts, scrambling terms, concepts and practices, forging linkages, becoming a form of action' (1995, p. 126).

Within the EYLP texts, this scrambling and scattered process establish connections between disparate discursive systems, about literacy, about texts, about students and how students learn, and about teaching, so that the version of literacy teaching that is produced seems to be normative, to be unquestionably rational, and therefore to be beyond critique. The nature of print-based texts in which this chapter is located necessitates a linear description of these different discursive systems that belies the complex interconnections between them as they play out in the EYLP texts. These 'discursive plateaus' (Honan, 2001, 2004) are like the roots of a rhizomatic plant in that they are always ceaselessly connected and interwoven within and around each other. But for the purposes of this chapter, we must lay them out separately, teasing apart each of the discourses in order to provide an artificial reading of their separate entities.

Assumptions about literacy education in the EYLP

The organizational framework, outlined in Figure 13.1, presupposes certain conditions of learning that are optimal for literacy teaching. These are:

- literacy is best taught in uninterrupted two-hour blocks of time;
- reading and writing are two distinct and separate components of literacy that should be taught separately;
- speaking and listening learning occurs as part of reading and writing while at the same time separated from the other modes;
- the organization of the class in the block is whole–small group–whole with emphasis on individual success and interactivity between groups of children and the teacher.

There are at least two different discourses on literacy teaching and learning operating within the texts of the organizational framework (not only the framework itself but the explanations of its operation contained in the professional development books, Teaching Guides and videos).

Back to basics and whole language

One of these discourses reflects a traditional skills-based approach to literacy teaching that resembles that found in syllabus and curriculum documents set in historical contexts as disparate as 1886 and 1941. In New South Wales in 1886 for example, Inspector Wilkins wrote: 'The first subject that strikes us as necessary for a primary school is Language, by which is to be understood a full knowledge of our mother tongue, including Reading, Writing, Grammar,

Analysis of Sentences, and Composition' (quoted in Green and Hodgens, 1996, p. 213).

And in 1941, again in New South Wales, the syllabus 'prescribed eight aspects of curriculum activity under the general auspices of "English"

> Reading (from the School Magazine and a large supply of supplementary readers from Third Class onwards)
> Poetry
> Oral Expression
> Written Expression
> Formal elements (phonics, punctuation, sentence and paragraph structure)
> Formal grammar
> Spelling
> Writing (handwriting)'
>
> (1941 NSW curriculum quoted in Reid, 1996, p. 151)

This 'back to basics' discourse affirming the value of skills that can be separately defined and addressed connects closely with the discourses used in popular media accounts of what counts as literacy. Its presence within the EYLP could be seen as an attempt to assuage the anxieties and tensions that arise whenever debates about a 'literacy crisis' are mounted in popular media contexts (see Comber et al., 1998).

A second discursive system operating within the organizational framework could be seen to directly contradict this skills-based approach. There is an emphasis on individual responses, on small group work, and on interactions between groups of children. This emphasis reflects the whole language approach which, in Australia at least, was developed in a move to break free from the constrictions of 'the skill and sub-skills exercises that had been used to teach reading and writing. Using real books, as opposed to traditional "readers", and encouraging children to produce their own literature were highly emphasized' (Comber, 1992, p. 2). Whole language proponents would be pleased to recognize Cambourne's 'conditions of learning' (1988) and Graves' 'process writing' within the EYLP.

Those of us who believe that there have been significant developments in the teaching of literacy since 1886, and that, while the Dartmouth Seminar in 1966 was ground-breaking and innovative, considerable research into new approaches has taken place in the past 40 or so years, will look to other parts of the texts of the EYLP for validation.

From whole language to child development

The Teaching Guides and the professional development manuals explicitly and implicitly take up both the skills and whole language discourses while also

using at least two other discursive systems about literacy teaching and learning. The particular points made about literacy in these texts are:

- children learn how to read and write in developmental stages and achievement in these stages can be measured by normative standards achievable by all children;
- reading and writing are best taught through the use of particular and specific strategies;
- reading is 'primarily' about gaining meaning from texts;
- texts can be categorized as 'print' and 'non-print' or 'visual' texts;
- a range of 'text types' should be used in early years writing activities.

There is a close connection between the discourses of whole language and those surrounding child development that are reflected in the texts describing the 'developmental stages'. As Walkerdine has pointed out, there is an inextricable link between the ideas of 'individualized pedagogy' and Piaget's theory of child development:

> The new notion of an individualized pedagogy depended absolutely on the possibility of the observation and classification of normal development and the idea of spontaneous learning. It was the science of developmental psychology which provided the tools and in which the work of Piaget is particularly implicated.
>
> (1984: p. 177)

The EYLP, as do other policy documents in Australia and elsewhere, makes a seamless connection between this individualized pedagogy, the 'natural' progression of children through stages of development, and the measurement of this progression through normative standards. [In the EYLP children who do not meet this standard are routinely removed from the classroom that operates within the organizational framework and subjected to one-on-one tuition in Reading Recovery programmes.] So, on the one hand, there is a discourse operating that claims individual children naturally progress through sequential stages of learning how to read and write, while on the other hand, children who are seen not to be progressing at the same pace as a significant number of their peers, do not meet the standards required, and are diverted from the natural progression. (See Nichols, 2004, and others in the *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* special issue on 'Questioning literacy development').

Sociolinguist approaches to literacy

The (relatively) recent development of sociolinguistic approaches to literacy teaching and learning is also taken up in the EYLP within the discourses related to texts. In the late 1980s a group of linguists and educators working at

the University of Sydney, drawing on the linguistic theories of Halliday, and theories of semiotics developed by Kress, constructed a pedagogy known as the 'genre approach' (Martin, 1991; Halliday and Martin, 1993). This approach requires explicit teaching and modelling of the linguistic features and textual structures of a particular genre. In the EYLP (and in the NSW policy documents as well) genres are now known as 'text types', drawing on what McWilliam (1994) calls 'folkloric assumptions' about teachers' inabilities to engage with 'difficult' concepts (such as 'genre'). As well there is a clear indication that only a certain number of these text types are suitable for children in the early years of school. While a 'range' is suggested, this does not include expositions, arguments or discussions.

Sociolinguistic accounts of the multiplicity of texts are reflected in the discourse describing the categories of texts. It is acknowledged that texts are not only print-based, and 'visual' texts are referred to. However, the primacy of print is explicated clearly: 'Teaching Readers in the Classroom is primarily about assisting students to gain meaning from print text' (Victorian Department of Education, 1997, EYLPa, p. 3). There is no mention of the use of digital texts.

Assumptions about teachers' work in the EYLP

As we have pointed out earlier, these discursive systems on the purpose of literacy education interweave and connect to produce persuasively 'reasonable' versions of what counts as literacy. Crossing over and interconnecting with these discourses is the thread of another discourse about the nature of teachers' work. This is especially evident in the texts concerning the recommended teaching strategies for teaching reading and writing. For reading, these strategies are named as: reading to, shared reading, language experience, and guided reading. For writing, the strategies are named as: modelled writing, shared writing, language experience, interactive writing, and guided writing. While all these strategies would be part of an effective teacher's repertoire of practices, the texts take up a narrowly defined view of these strategies. Each strategy is carefully explained in the Guides, with clear descriptions of how teachers should use the strategies, including a series of steps, and examples of questions to ask children in each step. Here, the texts take up new managerialist discourses about teachers' work, where they are constructed as bureaucrats, as 'capitalism's "soft cops" '(Lather, 1994, p. 245). In these discourses the teacher is seen to be technician, 'a routinized and trivialized deliverer of a predesigned package' (Goodson, 1997, p. 137; see also Apple and Jungck, 1990, and Robertson, 1996). The ideal automated technician of the new managerialist discourses is atheoretical and practical, is profoundly interested in the ways in which practice can transform lives, work and society, and is not so interested in the reflexivity that is needed if one is to question the transforming work being done.

The binary of theory–practice permeates teaching, teacher training, and theories of pedagogy to such an extent that it is often taken for granted. The implicitness of the theory–practice binary allows Connell to disavow teachers' abilities to theorize their work: 'In place of theories of education these teachers have what might be called operating principles about how to be a teacher: something between a rule of conduct and a style of approaching the world' (Connell, 1985, p. 179). Connell's statement itself constructs a binary between theories and operating principles, as if one's style of approaching the world cannot be called theoretical. This construction has much to do with the structuralist construction of knowledge, with the Cartesian split between the mind and body, and with the common-sense view that theory is somehow aesthetic and esoteric (the thinking), while practice is pragmatic, embodied actions (the doing). Construction of this binary denies the realities of the ways in which theoretical propositions inform embodied realities. This in turn denies the realities of teachers' work; classroom practice is always pragmatic, embodied, and is always informed by some kind of thinking.

The discourses that construct teachers as atheoretical and practical permeate not only the texts of the EYLP, but also the practices and processes that have developed around the implementation of the programme in Victoria. For example, the Department of Education in Victoria funds a regular Early Years Conference. The focus of these conferences is exemplary stories of 'good practice'. The conferences are not open to everyone – academics must be invited to participate either as participants or presenters. Most presentations are by teachers who report on success stories related to the implementation of EYLP. We are not refuting here the validity of teachers acclaiming their best practice, but pointing out that these kinds of conferences continue to maintain the binary between theory and practice.

The EYLP proponents could probably counter this criticism with the often quoted claim that the programme is 'research-driven' which allows a further claim that it is theoretically justified. The research was conducted by Hill and Crevola. The Early Literacy Research Project was a large-scale longitudinal study with the aim to 'refine, implement and evaluate a whole-school, design approach to improving early literacy outcomes' (Hill and Crevola, 1999, p. 1). The study created a link between whole-school organization, the improvement of student learning outcomes and the equivalent increase in 'standards'. This link may be empirically valid, and this is not the place to delve into the research that supports or contradicts this claim. What has happened in Victoria, though, is that this research has become not only accepted as empirically valid, but it holds a uniquely esteemed place in educational circles. Other equally important longitudinal studies such as those undertaken by Susan Hill and her colleagues (1998, 2002) are ignored and, of particular concern, the Hill and Crevola study appears to be above critique as it is accepted in as equally normative terms as the accounts of literacy it describes.

Provisional linkages between discourses

These quite disparate discourses about literacy, the teaching of literacy, and about children's learning of literacy are connected, and interconnected, by 'provisional linkages'. These linkages are commonalities and taken-for-granted assumptions that seem reasonable and unquestionable. These discursive linkages are like the lumpy nodes that can appear within a rhizomatic root system, or like the coupling bands that connect varied systems of pipes in some underground water systems. The first of these linkages is provided by the notion of the individual child, a creature of progressivist discourses that has become a common assumption in many policy documents related to schools and teaching:

> 'The child' in western liberal democratic societies is positioned as a special category of person who lacks, for a time, the complete range of capacities necessary for full functioning as a citizen. 'The child' is understood to acquire those capacities by progressing steadily along a universal path of development to emerge as a self-regulating, autonomous individual, the possessor of a range of attributes.
>
> (Tyler, 1993, p. 35)

There is a dichotomy here that allows this developing child to be described in terms of individual characteristics, while at the same time she is representative of the whole of society. This dichotomy underlies one of the fundamental tensions in teaching today, especially in early years classrooms: the tension between paying attention to each child's unique and individual differences while at the same time teaching that child using homogeneous practices in small group or whole-class situations. As Davies and Hunt explain:

> The concerted nature of students' work to achieve a reading group . . . reveals the common-sense knowledge we have of classrooms, that they must work in a collective way if learning is to take place. At the same time, in the attitude of teaching-as-usual, we think of learning as an individual activity. We assess individual performances and take ourselves to be legitimately doing so.
>
> (2000, p. 113)

The second of these provisional linkages connecting different discursive systems in the EYLP is the assumption that literacy is best learned in classrooms. Fundamental to the educational project, and drawing on historical versions of pedagogy based on the child's mind as a *tabula rasa*, this assumption denies the postmodern realities of children's lives today as they interact and engage with varieties of textual representations almost from birth. There

are clear indications in the EYLP texts that textual interactions, occurring in the home, playground, and in other social contexts outside of the classroom, are to be ignored. The use of 'book boxes' and 'take home readers' is illustrative of this assumption. Book boxes contain sets of 'levelled readers', usually readers drawn from a variety of reading schemes produced by commercial educational publishers. These readers provide a connection between the school and home. Each child takes home one of these readers and parents are required to read this text with their child and sign a sheet that indicates their compliance. The parent guide and video that are included in the Reading Kit outline the process for parents to use in this reading time. Here, school reading practices and processes are taken into homes while the home literacy practices are ignored, as is the significant and sustained research that reports on the importance of making home/school connections (see, for example, Heath, 1983; Moll, 1992; Freebody et al., 1995).

It is the gap between the discursive construction of 'students', 'literacy' and 'learning' within classrooms endorsed by the EYLP, and some of the kinds of home environments currently occupied by contemporary children that is illustrated in the hypothetical graphing investigation of literacy types and text types explored above. A different representation of this gap is provided by two brief descriptions of the competing 'worlds' of classrooms and homes. The snapshots that follow demonstrate the ways in which the discursive systems surrounding students, teachers, teaching and literacy (and the linkages that connect them) work to produce a normative view of literacy teaching and learning.

A classroom snapshot

The snapshot described below is an amalgam of the observations that Honan has made during her visits to classrooms, the written and verbal observations that her students share with her after their school practicum experiences, and descriptions of the models for the teaching strategies included in the EYLP videos. The snapshot is therefore not meant to provide empirical evidence of what is occurring in Victorian EYLP schools, but is intended to provide an illustration of the types of practices that are occurring. The snapshot is not intended to be embedded within any *'cinéma veritas'* tradition of ethnographic analysis (see for e.g. Knobel, 1999), but in a more postmodern sense is an image that has been verbally enhanced in ways that are similar to the digital enhancement of glossy magazine photos.

> *The classroom wall clock reads 9.10am. There are about 22 small children sitting cross-legged on a large square of carpet at one end of the classroom. Their posture is largely determined by their distance from the teacher, who sits on an upright chair in front of the group. So those directly under her gaze*

sit straight-backed, hands neatly folded in their laps. As the distance grows, so the posture deteriorates until you find, hidden from the teacher's gaze by the bodies of the rest of the class, two small boys lying on their backs. One is quietly humming to himself and rocking his lower body and legs from side to side, almost as an adult does in a physiotherapy exercise. The other boy is wriggling his whole body in a snakelike attempt to move closer to his neighbour. His arm is outstretched, at the point of grabbing the other boy's hair.

The teacher's chair is located close to a blackboard that stretches the width of the classroom. On one part of the board is a brightly coloured chart, with the heading Task Board, and a table of five columns and four rows. The days of the week form the headings for the columns. At the beginning of each row is a pictograph, a symbolized representation of one of the teaching strategies from the EYLP. For example, guided reading is represented by an image of four heads and a book. There are four small cards attached to the chart with velcro, and each card holds the image of an Australian animal, platypus, wombat, kangaroo, echidna.

On the other side of the teacher's chair is an easel, on which are pinned some large pieces of blank paper. Leaning against this paper is a large 'big book'. The teacher is reading the big book to the class. The class all seem familiar with the text, with some children reading loudly along with her. Two children talk loudly to each other about what is coming up, describing in some detail to each other the contents of the following pages. As with the posture of the children, their attention to the book reading seems to be directly related to their proximity to the teacher. The teacher's gaze seems to be divided between the pages of the book she is reading, and those children who sit close to her. There is an invisible circle of literary appreciation drawn around the teacher and those eight or so children who appear to be enjoying the reading.

The teacher finishes the reading of the big book and draws the children's attention to the Task Board. She elicits group and individual responses to her questions from the class. To the two wriggling boys at the back, she asks: 'What group are you in Troy and Toby?' The boys sit up and call back, 'Wombats miss!!' 'And what will the Wombats be doing this morning?' After a few seconds of silence, she asks, 'Can one of the Kangaroos help the Wombats – what will the Wombats be doing this morning, Sarah?' Sarah, one of the girls sitting directly at the teacher's feet replies, 'Reading with you miss.' 'Good girl, Sarah. And what will the Kangaroos be doing?' There is a choral response as many of the class shout, 'Sheets!!!' 'That's right, Kangaroos will be working on their worksheets at their desks.' The other two groups of children are reminded of their activities (reading from the Book Boxes, and reading with a parent helper, who is sitting quietly at the back of the classroom, close to the door). The teacher reminds the class of the rules for the morning: 'What happens when I'm working with the Wombats, girls

and boys? – What do you have to remember – Echidnas?' The Echidnas' responses are varied: 'Don't talk to you'; 'Stay away!', 'Sit in our seats til we've finished.' 'That's right, good girls, when I'm working with the Wombats I don't want to be interrupted, so you read your book quietly, and if you finish reading your book, what do you do?' 'Read it again!', the Echidnas reply in unison.

The signal to move is almost invisible to the outsider. The teacher merely says, 'Right, off we go' and many of the children stand immediately and walk purposefully around the room. One girl goes to a corner and pulls out a large plastic crate filled with 'levelled readers'. Another girl goes to the teacher's desk and collects a cardboard folder with a Kangaroo drawn on the cover. Five children cluster around the parent helper, who appears not to notice them, as she is bent over her own daughter who is whispering in her ear. The Wombat group, four boys and two girls remain on the carpet. Some children sit at desks and pull out pencil cases containing pencils and coloured markers. Within a few minutes all children seem to be 'on task', reading quietly or aloud, writing on worksheets, or responding to questions from the teacher. There is a 'working buzz' in the room. Gradually though the buzz is subsumed by the sounds of giggles and loud conversations.

The Echidnas have all read their Book Box readers, and have obeyed the instruction to read them again. All five children have now read their texts twice, and now discard the books. They are giggling, telling stories, there is the occasional pinch or tweak of an arm or leg.

The Platypus group with the parent helper are taking turns to read aloud from a reader. They too have finished this 'round robin' once, but the parent has begun the reading again. The children who are waiting for their turn do not follow the text, but whisper to each other.

The Wombats are still working with the teacher, but she seems to find it difficult to hold all their attention at once – so when she asks one girl a question about the text they are reading, the other five children appear to be daydreaming.

The Kangaroo group seems to be the quietest, and seem to still all be on task. However, they have all finished answering the questions on their worksheets, and are quietly and carefully colouring in the illustrations that border the sheets.

Occasionally the teacher looks up from her reading and questioning and glances at the wall clock. At exactly 9.40am, she stands up and claps her hands in a short rhythmic pattern. The children all fall quiet, some instantly while others are nudged into silence by their neighbours or by a certain look from the teacher.

'Right, thank you Grade 1s, onto the carpet please', the teacher commands. While most children scamper and scramble to reach the carpet square, some detour to return books to the crate, and a small group cluster

around the teacher, eager to inform her of exciting developments during the 20-minute activity time. She hushes some, listens carefully to a couple, and gives permission for two to go to the toilet. She then resumes her straight-backed chair at the front of the class – this again seems to be an invisible signal to the class, many of whom begin to try to catch her attention – hands waving frantically in the air, calling out, 'Miss, Miss, me please, me!!' The teacher selects one child, 'Tanah, your turn I think today.' The small girl clambers through the group and stands beside the teacher. The teacher asks, 'What did you do today Tanah?' Tanah replies looking directly at the teacher. During her reply the teacher gently holds her shoulders in an attempt to direct her gaze towards the class, but Tanah's body resists the gentle pushes and swivels around again to look at the teacher. Tanah's reply seems well rehearsed, there are phrases within her reply that the teacher mouths silently along with Tanah. 'This morning, the Kangaroos wrote a lot of B words. Then we wrote our words in sentences. Then we coloured in our pictures of balls, and baskets and biscuits. Then we packed up our sheets.' The teacher asks three other children, representing each of the four groups, to come to the front one at a time. They each describe the activity engaged with, each using similar words and phrases. The other children sit on the carpet in much the same positions and postures as they had taken at the beginning of the morning. The same children sit upright and cross-legged close to the teacher and the same two boys lie on their backs on the edge of the carpet square, hidden from the teachers' gaze by the other children.

When Honan's preservice students return from their school practicum experiences in early years classrooms, she asks them to describe the literacy activities occurring, and to answer the question: What are children learning about reading during this activity? If we apply this question to the snapshot above, the answers could be:

- Reading involves being organized into small groups.
- Teachers read to the whole class, children read aloud in small groups.
- Reading is writing words beginning with the same consonant.
- Reading is colouring in pictures of words beginning with the same consonant.
- There is a connection between ability to read, and ability to listen to instructions, recall previous activities, and sit with straight backs and crossed legs (see Kamler et al., 1992).
- Reading is about reading the same text repeatedly until you are completely familiar with the text.
- Reading is about gaining operational skills, or being able to draw on codebreaking resources to make meaning from a text (Freebody and Luke, 2003).

- When we talk about reading, we talk about what we do with texts, rather than our feelings or understandings of the content of the texts.

A family snapshot

We now attempt to enter into the world of young children at home, through the writing of a snapshot that produces one version of the literacy practices engaged in by a (non)representative family. This snapshot draws on our combined experiences with young children in family homes, particularly Rowan's as a mother, and Honan's as a long-term visitor in her family and friends' homes. In this snapshot we have not deliberately set out to be as contradictory as possible to the classroom snapshot, but have attempted to describe what we observe as commonplace and unremarkable in these homes in which young children we know live.

> *The living area is open plan. The kitchen is bounded by a high bench that serves as a place to eat breakfast, talk on the wall-mounted telephone, talk to people working in the kitchen preparing food, serving drinks, stacking the dishwasher. It is cluttered with school notices, mail including junk mail catalogues, take-away food flyers, bills and other textual features of a busy family. A computer is set up on a desk in a corner of the living area, with an internet connection and colour printer attached. A large carpet square delineates a television viewing area, with two couches and a low table organized around a large screen television with DVD player attached. 'Surround sound' speakers and amplifier are also connected to a CD player. An adult visitor has brought her laptop computer which is open on the low table, with The Sims loaded and temporarily paused. A sliding glass door leads to an outside area: there are external speakers mounted to the outside wall here, a large wooden table and chairs, a barbecue, and bar fridge.*
>
> *There are three bedrooms in the house. There is a television with gaming machine attached in one bedroom. On the floor of this bedroom is an assortment of figurines, trading cards and magazines related to Pokémon and Digimon cartoon series. Electronic games for the gaming machine are stacked on top of the television. There is another television with VCR attached in the second bedroom. In this bedroom there are large posters of pop-stars, soapie actors, and football players adorning the walls. A bookshelf and study desk are stacked with various types of texts: Total Girl and Girlfriend magazines; copies of fictional texts written as series (as diverse as Goosebumps series by R. L. Stine, the Famous Five series by Enid Blyton, and the Just . . . series by Andy Griffith; a copy of Lord of the Rings is also on the bed); and school artefacts such as report cards, certificates of achievement, exercise books and folders filled with worksheets.*
>
> *There are four adults and six children in the house, although only two adults and six children actually live here. The father is in the kitchen,*

talking on the phone and stacking the dishwasher. The mother and two adult visitors are sitting in the outside area talking and listening to a CD that is broadcast through the outside speakers.

Two girls sit at the computer using the internet connection and instant messaging software to chat online with school friends. A younger girl is sitting on a small chair in front of the television in the living area, watching a DVD of The Lion King. There are two boys in one bedroom playing an electronic game.

One girl leaves the online chat to resume playing The Sims on the laptop. She provides a running commentary on the onscreen actions of the characters for the girl who remains at the computer desk, who offers suggestions for movements of the characters ('get them to dance', 'she needs to go to bed') while at the same time reading aloud some of the online chat to her friend who is playing The Sims ('he says he likes Tam!'). The younger girl uses the indexing feature of the DVD remote control to find and replay one scene of The Lion King, reviewing this scene three times. She sings loudly and stands up to dance along with the music from this scene. In the middle of dancing for the third time, she moves out into the outside seating area and switches to singing and dancing along with the music of The Beatles coming from the outside speakers.

One of the boys from the bedroom appears in the outside area and describes to no one in particular the actions of one of the characters in the electronic game (he slayed the dragon, I slayed the dragon and now he's, we've only got one more level and we've won!!). He moves into the living area and sits in front of the television for a few minutes, watching The Lion King.

If we sent the preservice students to observe this family home, what kinds of responses would we get to the question, what are children learning about reading in this space? Some possible answers might include:

- Reading is about gaining information, following instructions, and sharing with friends.
- Reading involves making meaning from texts displayed on screens.
- There are many types of text that we read onscreen – instructions for video games, online chat, digital 'menus' for DVDs, text boxes within simulation games.
- There are also many types of print texts that we read – children's series books, catalogues and newspapers, take-away menus, handwritten notes, school artefacts.
- Reading is not a static activity – reading can be undertaken simultaneously with other activities, reading can be undertaken while moving around a room.
- Reading does not usually involve adults and children reading together.

- Reading texts are closely related to television, movie and computer game texts with the same topic, similar content, and sometimes the same structural layout.

The different sets of assumptions that underpin the classroom and household snapshots clearly signal some difficult terrain for educators. Those who wish to reflect the 'real world' in their teaching will inevitably struggle to negotiate the versions of 'real literacy' that are endorsed within the discourses underpinning the EYLP. Certain texts are routinely excluded. Certain forms of literacy are privileged over others. Certain kinds of relationships between students and teachers are more consistently endorsed than others. And what is most interesting is that the texts, practices, relationships most likely to be excluded are precisely those central to the 'new times' discussed at the start of this chapter. So while educators are constantly reminded of the need to teach in ways that respond to contemporary times, formal literacy programmes are increasingly narrowing down (rather than widening out) understandings of literacy (and the ways this can be assessed).

And yet it is entirely possible that the outcomes measured within schools actively pursuing EYLP goals will be met with positive responses. In the final section of this chapter, then, we'd like to put forward some of the questions we believe should be asked before any conclusions are drawn about the success, failure, value or relevance of any early childhood literacy programme.

Questions for moving forward

> Henceforth, it is the map that proceeds the territory.
>
> (Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*)

If we begin from the premise – outlined in the first half of this chapter – that contemporary educators have a responsibility to respond in systemic, persistent and meaningful ways to the contemporary world of children, certain kinds of questions must be asked of any literacy programme. These questions do not exclude attention to the extent to which children are encouraged or supported to develop operational skills associated with encoding and decoding 'traditional' literacy texts. But this is not the only criteria. Other questions must be asked. We are particularly interested in the extent to which the EYLP and similar contemporary literacy projects respond to the following challenges:

- What kinds of literacies are acknowledged, included/excluded and valued in the programme goals? Are operational, cultural and critical literacies accommodated?

- What kinds of texts are seen as legitimate classroom texts?
- To what extent, and in what kinds of ways, are texts chosen by children welcomed in the classroom?
- In what ways are children encouraged to look at the meanings naturalized within diverse texts?
- To what extent are social and cultural literacy agendas engaged with in the programme?
- To what extent is the diversity of the student population reflected in the content of texts?
- To what extent is the diversity of the student population reflected in the 'teaching' about/around certain texts, and text types?
- In what ways are teachers supported to develop their own literacies, and to enable them to incorporate a broader, more 'challenging' set of materials?
- In what ways are children's networks (of caregivers and families) legitimated within the chosen texts?
- In what ways does classroom practice support or complement out-of-school practice?
- In what ways does classroom practice constrain or devalue student enactments of 'out-of-school' literacies?

While this list is in no sense exhaustive, our main intention is to indicate the kinds of questions most likely to draw attention to the gaps and the silences within any literacy project. This is more than an academic exercise since the extent to which any programme includes or excludes diverse texts/points of views and people directly impacts upon the quality of the educational experience that children enjoy. And in a world that is characterized as much by persistently uneven educational outcomes as it is by anxieties over identity, citizenship and community, it seems to us absolutely vital that every discipline area, at every educational level, works to create links between diverse students and educational success.

And there is one final question that needs to be raised. This concerns the extent to which literacy programmes or frameworks designed to respond to 'new times' recognize and respond to the real capacities of teachers they involve. Narrow, prescriptive, overly structured programmes not only have little chance of engaging the full range of students, they also show little faith in the skills and abilities of classroom educators. To put it simply, teachers are not stupid. Nor are they characterized by a lack of vision, foresight, creativity or imagination. This is not to suggest that teachers are not in need of support (be it in the form of professional development opportunities, or personnel assistance, or the provision of resources) to respond to the complex terrain of literacy education. But it is absolutely vital that literacy programmes designed to respond to the 'real world' recognize and build upon the existing interests

and skills of students, teachers and community members. It is this combination, this particular mindset, will help us navigate the complex terrain, and minimize the chance that we lose sight of the people who must remain always at the centre of our enquiries: contemporary children. Many years ago, French philosopher Michel de Certeau made the powerful point that:

> Finally, beyond the question of methods and contents, beyond what it says, the measure of a work is what it keeps silent. And we must say that the scientific studies – and undoubtedly the works they highlight – include vast and strange expanses of silence. These blank spots outline a geography of the *forgotten*.
>
> (de Certeau, 1986, p. 131)

The key challenge for literacy educators is to embrace the challenge of mapping out their past, present and future work patterns to examine not only what they include, but also, and most importantly, those people, ideas and perspectives who are silenced and forgotten. With this in mind, we have a much better chance of creating the kind of literacy futures that can genuinely claim to respond to the demands of these complex, changing times.

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